Engines of Reform:

Third Parties in the Progressive Era

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Muncie, IN

May 2014

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2014

Abstract

During the Progressive Era, between 1890 and 1920, a host of political parties emerged to challenge the Republican-Democratic regime and to push a more progressive policy agenda. Most notable among these challengers were the People's (or Populist) Party, the Socialist Party, and the Progressive (or Bull Moose) Party.

In the context of the United States' two-party political system, third party candidates are often seen as "spoilers" or "wasted votes." After all, no third party candidate has been elected to the Presidency since Lincoln ran under the Republican label in 1860, usurping the formerly dominant Whigs. Third parties of the Progressive Era fared no better. None was able to take the Presidency, nor did they come close to a majority in Congress. Yet by 1920, much of the challenger parties' policy agenda had been implemented, including the direct election of senators, the eight-hour work day, child labor restrictions, and the graduated income tax.

This paper will explore the opportunities available to Progressive Era third parties and what role they played in influencing the policy positions of the dominant Republicans and Democrats. Through a historical analysis of late 19th and early 20th century political dynamics, we will show that third parties, in fact, played a critical role in setting the policy agenda and pressuring the major parties to adopt progressive reforms.

Acknowledgements

Any work of this scope requires the help of many people to complete. I would, first and foremost, like to thank Dr. James Connolly, who advised me during every step of the process, from research to revision, and tolerated me all along the way. Thanks are also in order for Dr. Ray Scheele and Dr. Gene Frankland, who advised previous and concurrent projects on similar topics, which contributed heavily to this work. Thanks also go out to Dr. James Ruebel, Dr. John Emert, Dr. Barb Stedman, and Coralee Young of the Ball State Honors College, who provided much-needed guidance, motivation, and the occasional meal to get me through.

A final thank you is in order for all the friends and family who supported me during the research and writing of this paper—in particular, to Grace Sharritt, who introduced me to the previously unknown wonders of coffee. I would be a far more unpleasant person without her continued love and support.

Author's Statement

I entered Ball State intending to become a high school history professor, but during my undergraduate career, I became increasing interested in both public policy and party politics. During the 2012 general elections, I followed closely the campaigns of Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein, also working on the campaigns to elect Indiana Democratic candidates Joe Donnelly and John Gregg. I have worked closely with both Republicans and Democrats in the Indiana statehouse to pass legislation concerning the role of money in the American election process. In the fall of 2013, I worked with Dr. Gene Frankland, researching the role of new and emerging parties in Western Europe, including far-right parties such as Greece's Golden Dawn and populist-oriented parties such as Italy's Five-Star Movement.

This paper, along with a concurrent project examining the opportunities for third parties in the contemporary American political context, expands on my past experiences and projects. It is intended for those, like me, who are interested in how major American parties (i.e., the Republicans and Democrats) can be influenced by third party challengers. The paper has implications for historians interested in Progressive Era politics, but also for contemporary activists and political scientists interested in the challenges of influencing public policy from outside the traditional two-party structure. While this paper does not make any policy recommendations concerning access for third parties in the United States, I hope readers will use it to begin a conversation about the American two-party system and the appropriate or desirable role for third party challengers.

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HIST 440
4/24/2014

Introduction

The Progressive Era in American politics, spanning roughly the years 1890 to 1916, marked a period of rapid legislative activity and reform—what David Mayhew calls a "lawmaking surge."[1] As industrialization came into its prime, Americans began to challenge the political and economic systems it had helped create. And alongside this challenge to the status quo emerged new political parties to challenge the two-party dominance of the Democrats and Republicans. Most prominent among these challenger parties were the People's Party (or Populists), the Socialist Party, and Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party.

The creation, development, and electoral performance of these three parties is well-documented, but little scholarship exists examining the role they played in shaping the policy reforms of the early twentieth century. After all, much of their political agenda—women's suffrage, direct election of senators, a graduated income tax, and an eight-hour workday, for example—had become law by the end of the century's second decade.

This paper seeks to partially explain how, despite the challenger parties' limited and short-lived electoral success, these legislative victories could be achieved. It will argue that third parties were vital to setting the legislative agenda and bringing Progressive Era reforms into mainstream ideology. They achieved this through three overlapping processes: incubation, radicalization, and incorporation. As small, developing parties, they became testing grounds for innovative policy ideas—something the large, slow-moving Republican and Democratic Parties could

[1] David Mayhew, *Parties and Policies: How the American Government Works*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 173.

not afford to become. The ideas soon became radicalized, especially through the Socialist Party, providing political cover for the mainstream to adopt more modest reforms. And finally, the new parties' reform ideology was incorporated into the agendas of the dominant parties, allowing them to flourish and become law.

Perceptions of Third Party Failure

Herbert Knox Smith, running for governor of Connecticut in 1912 on the Progressive Party ticket, predicted in the October 1911 *Yale Review* that, "[t]here will remain by 1914, only two great national parties, Progressives and Democrats." The Progressives, he argued, were creating a "new alignment."[2] Likewise, in the aftermath of the 1894 elections, an editorial in the Populist-aligned *Southern Mercury* asserted, "[t]here is nothing more certain than that the two old parties are to be overthrown, and that the champions of reform must and will take final charge of national affairs."[3]

These predictions proved premature. Following the election of 1896, the Populists quickly dissolved. By 1900, the party could rally only 50,000 votes for its presidential candidate, Wharton Barker.[4] The Progressive Party's death was just as

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[2] Herbert Knox Smith, "The Progressive Party," *The Yale Review*, Index to Volume 85, 1997, *The Yale Review* 2 (1): 18-32.

[3] Milton Park, ed. "After the Election." The *Southern Mercury*, November 8, 1894. texashistory.unt.edu: University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal of Texas History (accessed April 3, 2014).

[4] Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.. "American presidential election, 1900." Encyclopaedia Britannica. www.britannica.com (accessed April 3, 2014).

swift. In 1916, only four years after the party's creation, Theodore Roosevelt refused the Progressive nomination and defected back to the Republicans. Leaderless, Progressive voters were left to be absorbed by the two major parties.[5]

Unlike the third party challenges of the Progressives and Populists, the Socialist Party survived long into the 20th century and only formally dissolved in 1972.[6] But the Socialists never posed a serious challenge to the establishment at the national level. Even at its Progressive Era peak in 1912, the party won no Congressional seats,[7] and Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs brought in fewer than a million votes.[8]

The brief and dismal lives of Progressive Era third parties lead many scholars to count them as failures. In 1932, looking back on past third party movements, Paul H. Douglas pointed out the "almost monotonous lack of success" of every party from the Greenbacks to the Farmer-Labor Party. Contemporary commentators, too, emphasize their failures. Lawrence Goodwyn, one of the foremost scholars of Populism, writes that Populism "cannot be seen as a moment of triumph, but as a moment of democratic promise[....]their movement was defeated, and the moment

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[5] John A. Gable. *The Bull Moose Years: Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Party*. (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978), 246-49.

[6] "Socialist Party Now the Social Democrats, U.S.A." *New York Times,* Dec 31, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. (accessed April 4, 2014).

[7] US House of Representatives. "Congress Profiles: 63rd Congress." Congressional Profiles. history.house.gov (accessed April 5, 2014).

[8] Lewis L. Gould, *Four Hats in the Ring: the 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics*. (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 191.

passed." Charles Postel echoes this sentiment, saying, "Populism failed, leaving in its wake the question of why."[9]

The charge of failure is justified in regards to partisan success—no third party since the Republicans has attained significant legislative or administrative power at the national level. But the record is less clear on the subject of policy success. After all, as already mentioned, many of the Progressive Era third parties' policies were ultimately implemented. In 1906 a Republican Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, regulating industry practices to protect American consumers. In 1911, President Taft initiated the break-up of Standard Oil and the American Tobacco Company. In a three-year period, beginning in 1909, two amendments were added to the US Constitution, allowing for imposition of an income tax and the direct election of senators.

Of course, Progressive Era third parties did not exist in a vacuum, and many factors influenced this legislation. One factor was the progressive movement itself (as distinct from the parties it created). Even without the existence of third parties, popular opinion put pressure on the established parties and incentivized progressive legislation. Progressive-minded farmers' groups such as the Grange began to form as early as 1867, and by the time the Populists emerged in the 1890s, reform sentiment was already prevalent among rural and urban populations.[10]

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[9] Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 270.

[10] Dennis S. Nordin, *Rich Harvest: a History of the Grange, 1867-1900*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1974). books.google.com (accessed April 4, 2014).

The period also saw the rise of newspaper moguls such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, whose mass-circulation newspapers fundamentally changed how Americans accessed and consumed media.[11] "Muckraking" journalists such as Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair exposed the injustices of contemporary industrial life.

Meanwhile, Pulitzer and Hearst pioneered the practice of "yellow journalism," using sensationalism and exaggeration to attract new readers and boost circulation. Their tactics worked, and while yellow journalism itself was not a significant driver of reform, the resulting increase in circulation gave greater voice to the muckrakers and reformers, who also wrote for the papers. Pulitzer's reformist *New York World*, for example, increased circulation from 15,000 in 1883 to 600,000 in 1896, through a combination of yellow journalism and improved production techniques.[12]

The existence of these factors does not, however, diminish the influence of third parties. Third parties enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship with both the print media and the progressive movement. They played a distinct and significant role in setting a new legislative agenda.

Between War and Reform: Politics and Society after the Civil War

[11] Peri E. Arnold, *Remaking the Presidency: Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, 1901-1916*, (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 11.

[12] Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 582-83. books.google.com (accessed April 4, 2014)

The Southern economy suffered badly in the aftermath of the Civil War. Not only had it lost its slave population, but it also lacked the infrastructure for raising capital. Massachusetts, for example, in 1869 "had five times as much national bank circulation as the entire South."[13] Throughout the 19th century, the old Confederacy had only two major manufacturing centers, leaving Southern economies almost entirely dependent on a few cash crops, particularly cotton, rice, and tobacco.[14] In addition, following the war, land values fell by 90 percent or more. Southerners, in sum, lacked "money, credit, adequate transportation, or marketing agencies."[15]

Considering the poor performance and high turbulence of the post-war Southern economy, it is unsurprising that the impetus for reform in the pre-Progressive Era began in the South. The first sign of reform sentiment came in 1867, with the establishment of the Grange, an organization focused on economic cooperation between farmers. These cooperative measures ranged from the transportation of crops to the creation of banks and insurance plans. By 1875, membership in the organization had grown to over 750,000.[16] The Grangers, active in politics, launched the first post-war third party experiments, supporting a handful of challengers, including the Independent Party, the Antimonopoly Party, and the Reform Party. Although largely disempowered by the late 1870s, these parties (and

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[13] Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: the Populist Moment in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 27.

[14] M. Elizabeth Saunders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 19.

[15] Fred Albert Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897.* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc, 1945), 79, books.google.com (accessed March 12, 2014)

[16] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 105

the Grange itself) were pivotal in creating a base of support for progressive reform.[17]

As the Grange declined, the Farmers' Alliance rose to take its place. Likewise, the Greenback Party replaced the third parties of the mid-1870s. Membership estimates for the Alliance vary, but the lowest calculations put it at nearly one million by 1890.[18] Eventually, after its "abortive third party effort in 1880," the Alliance would form the basis of Populism.[19]

Labor organizations grew less quickly than their agricultural counterparts in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1879, when Grange membership was at its peak, membership in the Knights of Labor (KOL) was only 20,000. It was not until 1886 that labor organizations matched the numerical strength of organized agriculture.[20] This is partly because urbanization did not come into full swing until after the Civil War. In the three decades after 1860, the population of Chicago grew ten-fold, topping one million in 1890.[21] New York's population growth, while not as dramatic, nearly doubled in the same period, from 800,000 in 1860 to over 1.5 million in 1890.[22]

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[17] *Ibid*, 108.

[18] *Ibid*, 123.

[19] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 34.

[20] Sauners, *Roots of Reform*, 39.

[21] *University of Illinois at Chicago*, "Chicago Growth 1850-1990," Chicago Imagebase, tigger.uic.edu (accessed March 19, 2014).

[22] Cally Waite, "Population of New York City in the years 1860-1900," *Columbia University*, www.tc.columbia.edu (accessed March 19, 2014).

With increased urban population density came stories of poverty, disease, and destitution. Upton Sinclair, muckraking author of *The Jungle*, which spotlighted the abuses of the Chicago meatpacking industry, speaks in his 1907 book *The Industrial Republic* of "the ever-rising tide of misery and suffering." He observes two contemporary trends in society: "first a material change, a kind of economic apoplexy, the concentration of wealth in one portion of society," and second, "a protest against the rising frenzy of greed, and against the constantly increasing economic pressure."[23]

The protest sprit that Sinclair notes is the same spirit that gave rise to the Knights of Labor and, subsequently, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The KOL reached its peak in 1886, and as it began to decline, the AFL stepped in to fill the void. Although it didn't reach the KOL's peak-year strength until 1901, the AFL, headed by Samuel Gompers, would lead labor into the Progressive Era.[24]

Despite the strength of these farm and labor advocacy groups (at least 1.5 million in 1890, not including the Colored Farmers' National Alliance, which might have included an additional 1.2 million[25]), all of which promoted a progressive agenda, the Democrats and Republicans paid little attention to progressive policies in their 1892 party platforms.

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[23] Upton Sinclair, *Industrial Republic: a Study of the America of Ten Years Hence,* (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion, 1976), 103; babel.hathitrust.org (accessed March 23, 2014).

[24] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 39.

[25] Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 41.

The Democrats had the more progressive platform, calling for the abolition of convict and child labor, as well as the protection of railroad workers from injury.[26] But as the Populists charged in their own 1892 platform, the Democrats' focus was on the tariff. Over one-fifth of the document is committed to tariff reform, while only one-tenth addresses progressive issues (the largest of which is the return of unused railroad land to the public, an issue only briefly mentioned by the Populists).[27] The platform even criticized the Sherman Act of 1890, arguing that tariff reform will solve the problem of trusts. And in line with tradition, the Democrats remained fiercely committed to small government.

The Republican platform gives even less acknowledgement to progressive issues, endorsing only legislation to address the health and safety of railroad workers, while stating vague opposition to trusts and combinations. Together these issues constitute only three sentences in the document. Republicans, like the Democrats, devoted the largest portion of their party platform to the tariff issue.[28]

Although the 1892 party platforms were decidedly non-progressive, a handful of progressive policies were proposed and enacted in the pre-Progressive years. The first of these came in 1874, at the high-water mark of the Granger movement and in the midst of third party challenges by anti-monopoly and

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[26] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1892," *American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barabara,* www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed March 23, 2014).

[27] "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party," *George Mason University,* historymatters.gmu.edu (accessed March 23, 2014).

[28] "Republican Party Platforms: Republican Party Platform of 1892," *American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barabara,* www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed March 23, 2014).

independent tickets. Iowa representative George McCrary passed a bill through the House "to regulate the maximum charges on inter-state railways," but contemporary analyses, "doubtful" of its Senate passage, proved correct.[29]

After McCrary's unsuccessful attempt at reform, two important pieces of legislation passed Congress and became law. The first was the Interstate Commerce Act, which again attempted, this time successfully, to regulate the railroads. The bill declared that all railroad charges "shall be reasonable and just," and provided for a commission (the Interstate Commerce Commission) to regulate the railroads and investigate abuses.[30]

The second major piece of legislation was the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, intended to legislate against trusts and monopolies and give the government power to regulate those "in restraint of trade or commerce." [31] Ostensibly, it was a major victory for the progressive movement, whose goals had always included the abolition of trusts and monopolies. The first third parties of the 1870s Granger movement, after all, were antimonopoly parties.[32] But reformers would be largely disappointed, as enforcement of the act was rare. The first decade after the law's

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[29] John F. Dillon and Seymour D. Thomson, ed, *The Central Law Journal, Volume 1*, (Soule, Thomas & Wentworth, 1874), 170, books.google.com (accessed March 25, 2014).

[30] US 49th Congress, Act of February 4, 1887 (Interstate Commerce Act), Public Law 49-41, February 4, 1887; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-; General Records of the United States Government, 1778 - 1992; Record Group 11; National Archives, www.ourdocuments.gov (accessed March, 25, 2014).

[31] US 51st Congress, Act of July 2, 1890 (Sherman Anti-Trust Act), July 2, 1890; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1992; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives, www.ourdocuments.gov (accessed March 25, 2014).

[32] Nordin, *Rich Harvest*, 175-77.

enactment saw only sixteen prosecutions, five of which were pursued against unions, largely as a result of the Pullman strikes (these include a successful case against future Socialist Party candidate Eugene V. Debs, among others).[33, 34]

The Populist Challenge: 1892-1900

With the 1890s came a renewed push among farmers for progressive reform, and in 1891, the People's Party emerged from the ranks of the Farmers' Alliance. The Alliance subsequently fell apart, but, in the words of J.W.H Davis, "she died giving birth to the people's party."[35] The party absorbed much of the infrastructure of the Alliance, including many of the rural reform newspapers (for example, the *Dallas Southern Mercury*, which fully embraced the Populists in the run-up to the 1892 election).[36]

The Populists' 1892 platform, widely known as the Omaha Platform, offered a stark alternative to the existing parties. Charging that the Democrats and Republicans intended to "drown out the outcries of a plundered people with the uproar of a sham battle over the tariff," the platform and accompanying "sentiments" laid out a sweeping program of progressive reform. Within it were the

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[33] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 273.

[34] U.S. v. Debs, 158 U.S. 564 (1895).

[35] Postel, *Populist Vision*, 156.

[36] Milton Park, ed. "Important!: Especial Instructions and Suggestions Pertaining to the Election." The *Southern Mercury*, November 3, 1892. texashistory.unt.edu: University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal of Texas History (accessed April 3, 2014).

novel (for a major political party) proposals for a graduated income tax, free coinage of silver, national ownership of railroads and communications, the eight-hour work day, implementation of the referendum and initiative, Presidential term limits, and direct election of senators.[37]

Unlike the major parties, the Populists were not afraid to promote new, untested issues. This is one of the most important contributions of the Progressive Era third parties. As Goodwyn observes, the two dominant parties were "seemingly impervious to new concepts of any kind."[38] Their constituencies had been predetermined since the end of the Civil War, and they had thus become unresponsive to social or economic shifts in the country. The Populists, by virtue of being an insurgent party, were more able to "try out" new ideas on the electorate. In this way, they acted as an incubator for progressive policy.

The experiment worked. In the 1892 Presidential election, the Populist candidate received more than one million votes, capturing 8.5 percent of the popular vote and carrying five states—North Dakota, Kansas, Wyoming, Idaho, and Colorado.[39] Since 1960, after Republican usurpation of the Whigs, only two third parties have reached that level of combined popular and electoral success: the 1912 Progressive Party and the 1968 Independence Party.[40]

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[37] "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party," *George Mason University,* historymatters.gmu.edu.

[38] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 5.

[39] "U.S. Electoral College: Electoral Votes for President and Vice President 1893-1905," *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, www.archives.gov (accessed March 27, 2014).

[40] "1860 Presidential Election," *American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barabara,* www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed March 25, 2014).

The People's Party saw further gains in the 1894 midterm elections, netting almost 1.5 million votes. The Democrats, so long content with (and unresponsive to) their built-in constituency, saw the danger of a third-party challenger, knowing that as long as People's Party survived, "it weakened the political habits of the one-party heritage."[41]

The Democrats faced crippling losses in 1894. Their 61 percent majority in the House of Representatives fell by more than 30 points, to 29.4.[42] Finding themselves in the minority, they were "pressed toward wholesale reevaluations" of their party ideology.[43] Flanked by Republicans on the right and Populists on the left, fusion with the third party challenger was the only viable option. Over four years, the Populists had introduced Americans to progressive reforms, both through their communications infrastructure and through party politics. After the elections of 1892 and 1894, the American electorate would not likely have accepted the conservative two-party intransigence of 1890. For the Democratic Party, it was reform or die.

Haynes observes that, by signing their own death certificate, "the Populists won their greatest victory."[44] By fusing with the Democratic Party, they ensured that the 1896 election would not be fought on the same terms as previous races. The

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[41] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 343.

[42] Morton Keller, *America's Three Regimes: A New Political History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). *eBook Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 11, 2014) ebscohost.com

[43] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 429.

[44] Frederick Emory Haynes. *Third Party Movements Since the Civil War, with Special Reference to Iowa: a Study in Social Politics*, (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1916), 285.

Republicans, in fact, expected it to be, anticipating that "the tariff would be made the leading issue in 1896," as had been the pattern.[45] But when the Democratic convention met in Chicago, free coinage of silver would be the banner around which the delegates, as well as eventual Presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan, would rally.

To be sure, silver was a major component of the Democrats' 1896 Chicago Platform, just as it had been a major component of the Populists' Omaha Platform four years earlier. And Bryan's name has become virtually synonymous with his 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech, in which he warned Republicans that endorsing the gold standard was tantamount to "crucify[ing] mankind upon a cross of gold."[46] But the Chicago Platform marked a more fundamental shift in Democratic ideology, a shift away from the party's long-held belief in small government and towards a more progressive, class-conscious, and interventionist position.

Opposition to the tariff remained a pillar of Democratic policy, but its prominence in the platform was significantly reduced, relegated to a single paragraph. Instead, the platform laid out a sweeping program of progressive legislation, unprecedented for a major party—support for labor arbitration and other legislation to protect the rights of labor, support for term limits, unequivocal opposition to trusts and monopolies, and a call for a personal income tax to ensure "that wealth may bear its due proportion of the expenses of the Government." In the clearest break from its small-government tradition, the Democratic Party called for

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[45] *Ibid* 286.

[46] "Bryan's 'Cross of Gold' Speech: Mesmerizing the Masses," *George Mason University*, historymatters.gmu.edu (accessed March 27, 2014).

an expanded role for the Interstate Commerce Commission in regulating the nation's railroads.[47]

Even the language used to describe the party's policy is noticeably different. In 1892, the Democratic platform made reference to the "farmers and laboring classes" and made basic appeals to "overtaxed labor," but in general made no strong pronouncements about the exploitation of American producers.[48] The Chicago Platform, on the other hand, proclaimed that "labor creates the wealth of the country," decrying the "absorption of wealth by a few" and "enrichment of the money-lending class[...]prostration of industry, and impoverishment of the people."[49] In other words, in 1896, the Democratic Party embraced the language of oppression.

At the People's Party convention, the Populists would also nominate Bryan as their candidate. But Democratic-Populist fusion was not planned. As Sanders recounts, "Chariman Herman Taubeneck and his allies in the People's Party assumed that the conservative, Cleveland wing of the Democratic Party would maintain control of the presidential nominating convention. The silverites would then bolt to the People's Party."[50] The Populists believed that, facing two conservative challengers in 1896, they could establish themselves as the reform

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[47] Rebecca Edwards, "1896: The Silver Democratic Platform," 2000, projects.vassar.edu (accessed March 27, 2014).

[48] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1892."

[49] Edwards, "1896: The Silver Democratic Platform."

[50] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 138-39.

alternative and replace the Democrats as the major opposition party to the Republicans. They may have been correct.

But the Democrats, also understanding this, chose to undercut Populist support with a progressive, pro-silver platform, effectively ending any hope for a competitive People's Party challenge. Arkansas Governor Jeff Davis would later brag that the Democrats "stole all the Populists had; we stole their platform, we stole their candidate, we stole them out lock, stock and barrel." So, while the People's Party dissolved, its ideas lived on in the Democratic Party. As Haynes suggests, "[t]o the despised People's party of the early nineties we owe much of the impulse toward subsequent social reform."

The Republicans won the election of 1896, installing William McKinley in the White House. But they now faced a far more progressive Democratic challenge to their conservative policies. This pressure was seen in the actions of the McKinley and subsequent Roosevelt administrations. The McKinley presidency is not well-known for its antitrust credentials, paling in comparison to the "trust-buster" reputation of Theodore Roosevelt. Scholars, too, look to Roosevelt as the beginning of aggressive antitrust action. Sanders calls Roosevelt "the first president to throw the weight of his office behind the Sherman Act and to demonstrate that the act had teeth after all."[51]

[51] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 275.

McKinley, indeed, took a more conservative course on the trust issue. During his administration, no criminal prosecutions of trusts were pursued,[52] and the rate of corporate consolidation increased precipitously.[53] But as the 1898 elections approached, McKinley began to take the trust issue, conspicuously absent from the 1896 platform, more seriously. In June 1898, he signed into law the creation of the U.S. Industrial Commission, vetoed once before by Democratic President Grover Cleveland. And of his nine appointments to the commission, three were from organized labor.[54] This commission jump-started the trust-busting era and the report it submitted in 1902 would be integral in Roosevelt's successful suits against Standard Oil and the Northern Securities Company, among others.[55]

The establishment of the Industrial Commission added to a series of pro-labor initiatives taken by McKinley and the Republicans beginning in 1897, with the appointment of Knights of Labor leader Terrence V. Powderly as Commissioner General of Immigration.[56] In the same month as the establishment of the Industrial Commission, the Republican Congress passed the Erdman Act, bolstering the strength of railroad unions and creating an arbitration process for labor disputes.

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[52] Eliot Jones, *The Trust Problem in the United States,* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921), 443. books.google. (accessed March 27, 2014).

[53] Ralph L. Nelson, "The Merger Movement from 1895 through 1920," *Merger Movements in American History, 1895-1956* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), 33, www.nber.org (accessed March 25, 2014).

[54] S.N.D North, "The Industrial Commission," *The North American Review*, Vol. 168 , no. 511 (June 1899), 708. books.google.com (accessed March 28, 2014).

[55] United States Industrial Commission, *Final Report of the Industrial Commission, Volume 19*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902. books.google.com (accessed March 28, 2014).

[56] Edward T. James, "T.V. Powderly, A Political Profile," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 99, no. 4 (October 1975), 456.

And in 1899, in his annual address, he came out strongly against trusts and monopolies and stated, in contrast to the 1896 platform, "[t]here must be a remedy for the evils involved in such organizations."[57] These initiatives cannot be wholly attributed to the Democratic shift, but a progressive Democratic Party created a source of pressure for the Republicans that had not existed before the events of 1896.

Bryan and the Democrats: Post-Fusion Politics

Although Bryan lost the general election in 1896, the Democrats reclaimed 23 Congressional seats and recovered somewhat from their crippling defeat two years prior. In fact, of the nine elections between 1896 and their reclaiming of the Presidency in 1912, all but two saw Congressional gains for the Democrats (and in 1910, they would retake the House majority for the first time in 15 years).[58] Throughout this period of growth, the Democrats continued to pursue their new-found progressive agenda, at times aided by a new breed of progressive Republicans.

Aside from the Erdman Act and the Industrial Commission, the four years of the McKinley administration saw limited progressive reform, and the Democrats drew attention to that fact in their 1900 platform. The platform was largely a

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[57] "William McKinley: Third Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed March 28, 2014).

[58] US House of Representatives. "Congress Profiles: 59th Congress." Congressional Profiles. history.house.gov (accessed April 12, 2014).

reaffirmation of the principles set out in 1896, adding to the list support for the direct election of senators. Bryan, once again the party's nominee for President, continued to drive the party towards reform, and Populism's influence remained strong. Sarasohn attributes the Democrats' progressivism to three primary factors: a "strong Populist legacy, extensive Bryanism, and limited corporate presence" in the party's Southern strongholds.[59]

But four years later, the Democrats began to question their path. The party had made significant gains in the legislature since their routing in 1894 (reclaiming more than 70 seats), but 1904 still marked a decade of persistent minority status. So at the 1904 nominating convention, the Democrats reverted back to their pre-Populist conservative roots, choosing Alton Parker as their standard-bearer. Facing "a Republican president who loudly proclaimed himself the enemy of trusts and exploiters," the party hoped they could draw the support of business.[60] The platform was noticeably less progressive in both tone and content, removing all reference to the oppression and exploitation of labor. In fact, it made no mention of the producing classes in general. It opposed trusts not on the basis of fairness to labor, but to ensure "permanent business prosperity."[61]

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[59] David Sarasohn, *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 17.

[60] *Ibid*, xiv.

[61] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1904," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 14, 2014).

The strategy was a disaster. House Democrats lost much of the progress they had made in the preceding decade, losing 40 seats to the Republicans, and Parker experienced the biggest defeat of any major party Presidential candidate since before the Civil War, winning only 37 percent of the popular vote.[62] This defeat showed that, by fusing with the Populists in 1896, the Democrats had closed the door to conservatism and committed themselves to reform. As Nevada Senator Francis Newlands observed, "no man can be nominated who is not progressive."[63]

Democrats soon reversed course and found an ally in President Theodore Roosevelt. In the 1906 election, they embraced this alliance, running on a platform of "Roosevelt and reform," arguing (accurately) that Republicans in Congress did not support the President's progressive agenda. And by 1908, the Democrats had returned to (and expanded on) their reformism. In addition to the principles of the Chicago Platform, including the return of the income tax, the Democrats made new calls for campaign finance reform, reform of House rules, and the creation of a "national bureau of public health."[64]

A handful of progressive bills were passed through Congress in the years of Democratic minority, including the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Hepburn Act, the Meat Inspection Act, and an income tax amendment. But further progressive efforts were hampered by a large contingent of conservative Republicans. Although

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[62] "1904 Presidential Election," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 14, 2014).

[63] Sarasohn, *Party of Reform* 40.

[64] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1908," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 14, 2014).

insurgent Republicans sometimes offered support, "they were rarely as radical, and never as numerous, as the Democrats whom they denounced, despised, and depended upon."[65]

So it was not until 1910, when Democrats reclaimed the majority, that the door was open for further reform. Within the first months of their inauguration, the Democrats passed a constitutional amendment providing for the direct election of senators, followed by a campaign finance disclosure bill.[66] Congress went on to create the Department of Labor, pass a number of public health initiatives, and mandate an eight-hour workday for federal government contractors.[67] In 1910, the Progressive Era, broadly defined, had been in place for two decades. But the era of progressive legislation had just begun.

Socialists, Radicalization, and the Leftward Shift

During the post-Populist period, from 1900-1912, another third party was on the rise: the Socialist Party of America. The Socialists never proved to be a serious national contender, taking in, at their peak in 1912, only 6 percent of the popular vote (although regional support was significantly stronger).[68] Despite this limited

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[65] Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 86.

[66] *Ibid*, 97-8.

[67] "Record of Legislation of the 62nd Congress," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, March 4, 1913, Keith R. Johnson '56 Digital Archive, Cornell University (accessed April 20, 2014).

[68] "1912 Presidential Election," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 14, 2014).

success, the Socialists served two important purposes in early 20th century politics. The first was to ensure a stable voice on the left side of the spectrum, ready to challenge the Democrats if they reverted back to conservatism. The second purpose was to provide a distinct radical choice in the election, thus allowing the Democrats (and later, the Progressives) to present themselves as a moderate alternative.

Eugene V. Debs, the party's figurehead and five-time Presidential candidate, joined the People's Party in 1894, "renounc[ing] his long association with the Democratic party."[69] And in 1896, he was the frontrunner for the party's Presidential nomination, before his withdrawal and endorsement of Bryan.[70] Debs refused the party nomination despite strong insistence by many within the organization. In refusing it, he recognized the reforming potential of Bryan within the Democratic Party and the benefits of Populist fusion. While recognizing that a "vast difference existed between Bryan and the Democratic party," Debs wrote in a private letter to Bryan, "you are at this hour the hope of the Republic—the central figure of the civilized world."[71]

Not two months after the 1896 election, after his Bryanist hopes failed to materialize, Debs fully committed himself to Socialism. In his first run for President under the Socialist banner (then the Social Democratic Party) in 1900, Debs emphasized "that both the Republican and Democratic parties are in favor of the

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[69] Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 147.

[70] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 58.

[71] Salvatore, *Debs*, 158.

private ownership of the means of production and distribution[....]There is absolutely no difference between them."[72]

Debs and the Socialists, like the Populists before them, sought to represent the producing classes in ways that the Democratic-Republican duopoly did not—in the words of the 1900 Social Democratic platform, to create a working-class party "to conquer the public powers now controlled by capitalists."[73] In addition to a broad call for collective ownership of the means of production, the Socialist platform called for several more concrete measures to achieve that end, or "steps in that direction." Included in those steps were proposals for women's suffrage, public ownership of railroads, reduction in working hours, unemployment insurance, the initiative and referendum, and the abolition of war through arbitration.[74]

Under this platform in 1900, Debs won fewer than 100,000 votes.[75] But in 1904, when the Democrats strayed from their progressive trend, Debs' votes quadrupled.[76] And in nearly every state that saw significant Socialist growth, the Democratic vote dropped dramatically. Perhaps most striking is Montana, where the

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[72] Eugene V. Debs, "Competition vs. Cooperation" (speech, Chicago, 1900) *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.*

[73] The National Campaign Committee of the Social Democratic Party, *The Socialist Campaign Book of 1900*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1900), 151. books.google.com (accessed April 15, 2014).

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] "1900 Presidential General Election Results," *Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, uselectionatlas.org (accessed April 13, 2014).

[76] Salvatore, *Debs* 190.

Socialist vote approached 10 percent in 1904, while the Democrats' share dropped by nearly 25 percent.[77]

With those numbers, Debs and the Socialist Party demonstrated the continued appeal for reform. In the absence of a major reform party, many Americans would vote for a radical one. And when Bryan returned as the Democratic Presidential contender in 1908, he and the Democrats adopted one of the most radical of the Socialists' ideas, government ownership of railroads, even at the risk of alienating the more moderate elements of the party.[78] In that same year, the Democrats, while not endorsing women's suffrage, allowed women to be represented at their convention for the first time.[79] And so a 1904 *New York Times* article, predicting co-optation of Debs' ideas by "Bryanized Democrats upon the one hand and the Republicans upon the other," proved prescient.[80]

As the Socialists incubated new progressive ideas and put pressure on Democrats from the left, they also fortified Democrats against demonization as a radical party. In 1896, the forces of the left had converged in their support for William Jennings Bryan. That included the Populists as well as many future Socialists, such as Debs. As Postel points out, "For Republicans[...]the Populist

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[77] "1904 Presidential General Election Data - National," *Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, uselectionatlas.org (accessed April 13, 2014).

[78] Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 23.

[79] "July 7, 1908: Rocky Mountain News," *Rocky Mountain News*, rockymountainnews.com (accessed April 14, 2014).

[80] "Swallowing the Socialists," *New York Times*, 18 December, 1904, in *The Progressive Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1890 to 1914*, by Elizabeth V. Burt (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2004), 196

endorsement confirmed their worst fears about the Bryan campaign." Theodore Roosevelt charged "that the Populists were 'plotting a social revolution."[81]

By 1904, those attacks were beginning to shift towards the Socialists. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, in a November 5 editorial, argued that "Debs's policy is one of destruction on the one hand and greed on the other."[82] The existence of a radical leftist challenger allowed both the Democrats and the progressive Republicans to present themselves as moderate reformers, arguing, as President Roosevelt did in his 1904 address to Congress, that "the only alternative[s]" to progressive reform were "an increase of the present evils on the one hand or a still more radical policy on the other."[83] These arguments would be repeated in the critical election of 1912, even as the parties took on more of the Socialist platform.

The Progressive Triad and the War of 1912

The election of 1912 remains one of the most dynamic and exciting elections in American history. On election day November 5, four major candidates appeared on the ballot—William Taft for the Republicans, Woodrow Wilson for the Democrats, Theodore Roosevelt for the Progressives, and Eugene Debs for the Socialists. And of

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[81] Postel, *Populist Vision* 269.

[82] "For President, Eugene V. Debs," *New York Times*, 7 May, 1904, in *The Progressive Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1890 to 1914*, by Elizabeth V. Burt (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2004), 193.

[83] "Theodore Roosevelt: Fourth Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 15, 2014).

the four contenders, only one, Taft, proposed a conservative platform. So 1912 was, at its core, a race of progressives.

Gould writes that "[f]ew anticipated the four-cornered contest that would be launched" in 1912. Indeed, Roosevelt himself vehemently denied any interest in the presidency as late as 1911.[84] In the end, Roosevelt did challenge Taft for the Republican nomination. In states where citizens were allowed to vote in primaries, Roosevelt won a decisive victory, capturing 1.2 million votes to Taft's 800,000. But at the convention, Taft defeated his opponent in what Roosevelt and his supporters called a fraudulent vote.[85]

Roosevelt subsequently seized his opportunity to lead a party split, thereby answering the call of William Rockhill Nelson two years earlier, when he asked in the *Kansas City Star*, "Is not this the logical time to look forward to a new party which shall include progressive Democrats and Republicans—a party dedicated to the square deal and led by Theodore Roosevelt?"[86]

Roosevelt's newly formed Progressive Party, however, went far beyond the Square Deal of his former Presidency. The new party was crafted in the frame of Roosevelt's New Nationalism. Proposed by Roosevelt in 1910, New Nationalism was "a program of government activism more sweeping than what any major Republican

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[84] Gould, *Four Hats*, 20-21.

[85] *Ibid* 67.

[86] Gable, *Bull Moose Years*, 9.

or Democrat had proposed before him."[87] And when the Progressives met at convention in 1912, the platform they adopted was expansive and unprecedented.

The platform, first of all, called for a sweeping program of popular government. This included support for direct primaries, direct election of senators, the initiative, the referendum, popular recall of judicial decisions, and even a more direct method of amending the Constitution. It called for women's suffrage, graduated inheritance and income taxes, social insurance, and campaign finance reform. It made decisive statements in opposition to war, child labor, and bureaucratic nepotism. The most conservative aspect of the platform was its trust policy, which proposed "supervision and regulation" rather than government-enforced dissolution.[88] But as a whole, it was, excepting the Socialist platform, the most progressive political agenda the United States had ever seen.

Progressives knew that Roosevelt would win if the Democrats returned to their 1904 strategy or nominated a candidate not sufficiently progressive. B.F. Harris, a Progressive, wrote before the Democratic nominating convention, "I'm praying that the Democrats will have a non-progressive platform and candidate."[89] Such a circumstance would leave progressive voters with no choice but to vote for Roosevelt or Debs.

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[87] Gould, *Four Hats*, 17.

[88] "Minor/Third Party Platforms: Progressive Party Platform of 1912," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 15, 2014).

[89] Gable, *Bull Moose Years*, 21.

The Democrats knew this, too. Woodrow Wilson, who would eventually, become the 1912 Democratic nominee, had not always displayed himself as a progressive and before 1910 had been comfortably placed "on the right among his party where states' rights and limited government still held sway."[90] But the years of 1910-12, as one of Wilson's associates noted, were perfect "for an outstanding Democrat to become a progressive."[91] And he did. By the 1912 convention, Wilson was the leading progressive candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, and after 46 ballots, he secured the nomination.[92]

The Democrats, knowing they needed to rival Roosevelt's progressivism, agreed upon their most progressive platform to date. Like the Progressives' platform, the Democrats' called for direct election of senators, a graduated income tax, presidential primaries, and sweeping campaign finance reform. It advocated stricter railroad regulation, injury compensation laws, and the creation of a unified health service.[93]

Understanding the need to "provide an alternative to his rival that confirmed his own progressive credentials," Wilson and the Democrats sought to outmaneuver Roosevelt on the trust issue. After meeting with Louis Brandeis, Wilson decided on his posture. Rather than advocating government regulation of big business, he

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[90] Gould, *Four Hats* 19.

[91] Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 120.

[92] *Ibid* 142.

[93] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1912," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu accessed April 15, 2014).

would support the enforced break-up of trusts and monopolies through the Sherman Antitrust Act.[94]

The Socialists under Debs advocated much of the same policy as they had since 1900. But the party's role as an incubator of new ideas was lessened. Their ideas had already been incubated, and largely co-opted. As Debs himself argued, Roosevelt had "stolen the planks of the Socialist platform."[95] Women's suffrage, accident insurance, and the initiative and referendum, among others, had become mainstream issues.

The party's bigger role in 1912 was its position on the far end of the political spectrum. Taft attempted to warn against the "radical proposals" of Roosevelt and Wilson. But with the existence (and continued growth) of the Socialists, Roosevelt and his supporters were able to deflect, arguing that "the new party had been founded to stop the country's drift towards socialism[....]by satisfying the just demands of the people before they go over to Socialism."[96]

When the election results came in, Wilson won the Presidency in a resounding electoral victory, although with less than 50 percent of the popular vote. Roosevelt came in second, splitting the Republicans and defeating Taft by more than half a million votes.[97] But the biggest victory was not for Wilson. It was for the progressive agenda in general. The three progressive candidates—Wilson,

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[94] *Four Hats* 163-64

[95] *Ibid*, 159.

[96] Gable, *Bull Moose Years*, 86.

[97] "1912 Presidential Election."

Roosevelt, and Debs—together took in more than 75 percent of the popular vote, and a stunning 98 percent of the electoral count. Taft carried only Utah. Wilson had not won a popular mandate, but progressivism had.

The Progressive Mandate: 1912-1916

Entering his first term, Woodrow Wilson did not have the full backing of many of his ostensible ideological allies. New Jersey Progressive Everett Colby predicted that, despite his progressive credentials, "Wilson will be checkmated by his party at every move."[98] But in the aftermath of the overwhelming Democratic-Progressive (and, to an extent, Socialist) victory, Colby's prediction did not come to pass. Almost immediately, the Democrats moved forward with a decisively reformist legislative agenda.

The Wilson Congress' first order of business was to reduce the protective tariff. The tariff had been part of the mainstream prior to the Progressive Era, but it was also "to progressives one of the symbols of privilege."[99] Despite opposition from powerful committee members, Wilson negotiated the elimination of tariffs for wool, sugar, and "[a]ll products manufactured by the so-called trusts, such as iron and steel."[100] In a more distinctly progressive move, to make up for revenue lost from tariff reductions, Congress passed the first graduated personal income tax in

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[98] Gable, *Bull Moose Years*, 24.

[99] Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917*, (New York: Harper, 1954), 36.

[100] Link, *Wilson*, 38.

American history, which, while moderate, represented a long-awaited victory for progressives.

The next great progressive achievement came with the creation of the Federal Reserve System, and it came about despite initial opposition by the President. Following his election, Wilson began to negotiate a system of privately controlled central banks. But the progressive wing of the party revolted, insisting upon public control and government regulation. The compromise that emerged was another major victory for progressive advocates.

This stream of progressive reform continued throughout the first two years of Wilson's administration, although not always, as with the Federal Reserve Act, with the full support of the President. The Seamen's Act, signed by Wilson in early 1915, bolstered maritime safety laws and acted as the "*Magna Carta* of sailors' rights."[101] The Clayton Antitrust Act, "revolutionary and destructive" to some Republicans, sharpened the teeth of the Sherman Act.[102] And accompanying legislation increased government control over railroad securities created a new commission with increased power to regulate trusts.[103]

By no means did progressivism win every battle in the years after the 1912 election. Several government bureaus "quietly began to segregate workers in offices,

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[101] E. Kay Gibson, "Brutality on Trial: 'Hellfire' Pedersen, 'Fighting' Hansen, and the Seamen's Act of 1915," *Law and Politics Book Review*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (January 2007), 1-4. *www.lawcourts.org* (accessed April 17, 2014).

[102] Saunders, *Roots of Reform,* 282-89.

[103] Link, *Wilson*, *68.*

shops, rest rooms, and restaurants."[104] (Then again, neither the Democrats nor the Progressives embraced progressive racial issues during the 1912 elections). During the antitrust negotiations, labor failed to win adequate exemptions.[105] But as a whole, progressives were the dominant force during the 63rd Congress.

After 1914, however, the flood of progressive legislation came to a grinding halt. No major reform initiatives were pursued during the first year of the 64th Congress.[106] Instead, events of 1915 to mid-1916 would be dominated by foreign policy—the sinking of the Lusitania, the invasion of the Dominican Republic, and the pursuit of Pancho Villa, among other events.[107]

But as the Presidential elections approached, progressivism reentered the consciousness of the Democratic Party. The 1916 election was, in the words of Sarasohn, "a referendum on four years of far-reaching progressive legislation." The Democrats were open not only to charges of radicalism from the right, but also to charges of conservatism from the left.

By Summer 1916, the 64th Congress had almost no progressive credentials to campaign on. That changed in May, with the passage of a child labor law, followed by a flurry of legislation from an eight-hour law for railroad workers to a more sharply progressive income tax. Wilson, previously resistant to such legislation, was

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[104] Link, *Wilson*, 64-5.

[105] Saunders, *Roots of Reform*, 289.

[106] Link, *Wilson*, 80.

[107] Frederick S. Calhoun, *Uses of Force and Wilsonian Foreign Policy*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press), 2-3, 32. books.google.com.

"motivated by Progressive pressures and the need to win their votes" and "reversed himself."[108] Thus, by the November elections, Democrats could boast a well-supported reputation for reform.

1916: Third Party Destruction, Progressive Decline

At its 1916 convention, the Progressive Party suffered a setback that almost instantly dissolved the party's chances at future success: Roosevelt refused the nomination and defected back to the Republicans, declaring support for Presidential nominee Charles Evan Hughes. On Roosevelt's departure, the party unraveled, as the leadership retreated into the Republican or Democratic camps.

This left Republicans and Democrats to compete for the Progressive vote. Republicans, as the more strongly conservative party, would largely appeal to Progressives on the basis of tradition, since many (including Roosevelt) maintained strong party bias despite ideological difference. But on policy grounds, the Democrats clearly aligned more closely with the Progressive Party. Since the post-Populist shift and the emergence of insurgency Republicanism, Democrats had worked with Roosevelt and other progressives towards parallel goals.

Seeking to emphasize that ideological similarity, the 1916 Democratic platform highlighted the progressive accomplishments of the previous four years. It boasted of Democratic attacks on "special privilege, a vicious tariff, obsolete banking laws and an inelastic currency," while proposing a handful of new legislative

[108] Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 183-84.

initiatives, including expanded labor protection and enactment of women's suffrage.[109]

When the ballots came in, the Democratic strategy proved successful. In the West, "large parts of the third party apparatus went over to Wilson," and the Democrats saw their strongest support in areas where Roosevelt had dominated in 1912. Likewise, the Democrats performed well where Debs and the Socialists had been strongest four years earlier.[110] With the 1916 elections, the Democrats secured a new and permanent Western presence, changing the nature of their electorate.[111]

The stage seemed set for a renewed surge of progressive legislation, but less a month after inauguration of the 65th Congress, President Wilson called a special session and Congress declared war on Germany, entering World War I.[112] Domestic reform came to a near halt, and no major progressive legislation was passed until the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919. Thus, the death of the Progressive Party and the coming of war marked the end of the Progressive Era.

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[109] "Democratic Party Platforms: Democratic Party Platform of 1916," *The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed April 13, 2014)

[110] Sarasohn, *Patry of Reform*, 215-20.

[111] *Ibid* 235.

[112] Woodrow Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States," *Senate Documents*, 65th Congress, First Session (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1917).

Conclusion

The role that third parties played in shaping the American political landscape has been underappreciated and under-analyzed, both by Progressive Era observers and contemporary scholars. But in fact, as Haynes argued in 1916, "they were the pioneers in the conversion of American politics from almost exclusive attention to constitutional and governmental matters to the vital needs of the people."[113]

When the Populists entered the political scene in 1892, money ruled politics on both sides of the aisle. Goodwyn notes the "almost wholly nonideological climate created by sectional politics," where both parties "responded primarily to the needs of businessmen."[114] The Populists brought a politics of substance, acting as an incubator for new, progressive policy ideas.

But they moved beyond their incubator role in 1896, when, seeing a chance to infuse their ideas into the mainstream, the Populists integrated with the Democratic Party. In 1896, the Democrats under William Jennings Bryan took on a distinctly progressive character. As early as 1892, they "fought populism by imitating it in their own platforms." But without pressure from the Populists, the Democrats might have slipped back into the politics of sectionalism and nonideology.

The Progressives and Socialists of the early 20th century played a similar role, incubating ideas and driving the political conversation further to the left. The rightward shift of the Democratic Party in 1904, to their own electoral disadvantage,

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[113] *Third Party Movements*, 470
[114] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 9.

is testament to the strong conservative tendencies that existed within its ranks. But conservative regression was dangerous, when third parties acted as a ready receptacle for Democratic defectors. It was that threat that caused the Democrats to discount a conservative candidate in 1912 and caused them to lurch leftward in the run-up to November 1916.

It is important not to overemphasize the role of third parties in securing progressive legislation. Third parties, as noted at the beginning of this paper, were not the only factors influencing the progressive shift of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many factors converged to create the circumstances of the Progressive Era—urbanization, the rise of mass media and muckraking, and a host of high-profile industrial accidents.

The convergence of these factors all but ensured that progressive politics would emerge in the United States during the early 20th century, but without the pressure of third parties, those politics would have taken a much different shape. Almost certainly, both major parties would have been more cautious, more conservative, and slower to take on significant progressive reforms. In this way, third parties were more than symptoms of the national progressive movement. They were powerful and influential engines of reform.

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